

Public Policy and Society: Two Essential Mediating Factors for Conditional Transfer Programmes

by Agustín Escobar Latapí, CIESAS and CONEVAL

The evolution of PROGRESA/Oportunidades program demonstrates that Conditional Cash Transfer programmes (CCTs) do not function in an isolated manner. The program is implemented by a national authority that consolidates information relating to programme conditionality compliance, decides who to target as beneficiaries, and distributes resources to such beneficiaries. Considering that health and education services are fundamental elements of the *Oportunidades*, programme success is dependent upon the quality and effective provision of such services when they finally reach their intended beneficiaries, at the local level.

Escobar's (2012) study takes this observation as its guiding premise. He analyzes two particularly salient circumstances which underscore the inherently dynamic and multi-dimensional interface of a given CCT.

The first of these relates to public policy. As Escobar explains, at the outset the *Oportunidades*' operations, its high-levels of political support that ensured that the provision of intended services was extended to areas identified as isolated, indigenous and historically marginal. These 'compensatory' policies already existed, but due to the implementation of *Oportunidades* they attracted greater attention and budgetary resources.

This is significant because it helps explain an apparent paradox that has long-interested those involved in studying the Mexican CCT. On one hand, the quantitative impact evaluation of the Programme show positive, but modest impact with respect to the increase of school attendance among beneficiaries. On the other hand national level statistics reveal a substantial increase in the school attendance of young people living in rural areas since the Programme began. What explains these results? For Escobar, the explanation has much to do with the fact that the Programme was part of a wider strategy that increased the supply of educational and health services in marginalized rural areas. As such, both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the *Oportunidades* could spend more years studying at school, which explains the attenuation bias in the impact evaluation estimates. In contrast to the conventional wisdom on the subject, the Programme, and the broader strategy from which it was part, has affected both the supply and the demand of services.

The second circumstance analyzed by Escobar is that of social structures and institutions, as reflected by how young people perceive the possibility (or not) of upward mobility based on available information, and social networks accessible by such young people. With the change of the economic-institutional model that commenced in 1988, the Mexican employment

structure became more rigid and unequal. PROGRESA/Oportunidades may have modified this situation in favour of poor young people living in rural areas by way of their increased access to education.

Escobar illustrates the steps that these young people have taken, the factors that have had a substantial effect (negative and positive) on their success, and the lack of public policies to support them upon the finish of their studies and exit of the programme. In line with the findings of Sánchez and Jiménez (2012), the author finds that leaving one's social class behind is a process in which a set of identifiable resources need to be mutually reinforced to facilitate the ease for young people to study, on the one hand, and to decrease financial dependencies on their families to support their studies in the move towards adulthood on the other.

A number of serious setbacks for these young people along with some noteworthy achievements were highlighted between the end of the qualitative evaluation of 2007 and the current study. Taken as a whole, the design of the Programme appears to have overlooked the significance of the rigid class structure characterizing contemporary Mexican society. Public sector occupations seemed to present the most likely opportunity to move towards upward in terms of occupation. As a matter of fact, no one in the sample used in this qualitative study managed to work in professional activities in the private sector. Although one would expect they will do so as soon as some of the members of this cohort of former beneficiaries graduate from university courses such as law, agrarian sciences, dentistry, nursing, and engineering. Thus, the full impact of the programme should be better captured when former beneficiaries reach the age bracket of 25-30 years old and those who obtained a university degree start working as professionals.

The setbacks that were experienced by these young people do not however warrant the conclusion of programme failure. The occupations of former beneficiaries are somewhat better than those who never participated in the programme to begin with, as is shown by the 2007-2008 qualitative evaluation. This evaluation also shows that competencies acquired at school are important in most of these occupations. Thus, even though the impact on their career prospects seems modest at this point, one could expect larger impacts to reveal themselves in the forthcoming years.

References:

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